The Purple Parasol

George Barr McCutcheon

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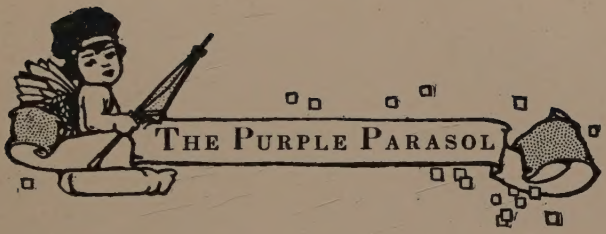
THE PURPLE PARASOL

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BY

GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

Author of "Beverly of Graustark," etc.

With Illustrations by HARRISON FISHER and
Decorations by CHAS. B. FALLS

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The Purple Parasol

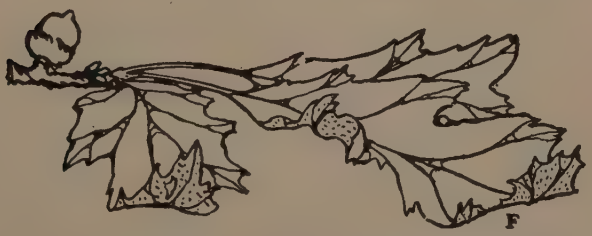
YOUNG Rossiter did not like the task. The more he thought of it as he whirled northward on the Empire State Express the more distasteful it seemed to grow.

"Hang it all," he thought, throwing down his magazine in disgust, "it's like police work. And heaven knows I haven't wanted to be a cop since we lived in Newark twenty years ago. Why the dickens did old Wharton marry her? He's an old ass, and he's getting just

what he might have expected. She's twenty-five and beautiful; he's seventy and a sight. I've a notion to chuck the whole affair and go back to the simple but virtuous Tenderloin. It's not my sort, that's all, and I was an idiot for mixing in it. The firm served me a shabby trick when it sent me out to work up this case for Wharton. It's a regular Peeping Tom job, and I don't like it."

It will require but few words to explain Sam Rossiter's presence in the north-bound Empire Express, but it would take volumes to express his feelings on the subject in general. Back in New York there lived Godfrey Wharton, millionaire and septuagenarian. For two

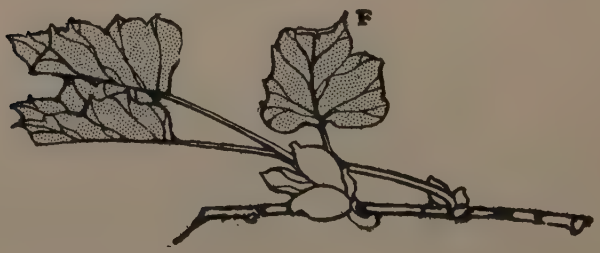
years he had been husband to one of the prettiest, gayest young women in the city, and in the latter days of this responsibility he was not a happy man. His wife had fallen desperately, even conspicuously, in love with Everett Havens, the new leading man at one of the fashion-



able playhouses. The affair had been going on for weeks, and it had at last become the talk of the town. By "the town" is meant that vague, expansive thing known as the "Four Hundred." Sam Rossiter, two years out of Yale, was an attachment to, but not a component part of, the Four Hundred. The Whartons were of the inner circle.

Young Rossiter was ambitious. He

was, besides, keen, aggressive, and determined to make well for himself. Entering the great law offices of Grover & Dickhut immediately after leaving college, he devoted himself assiduously to the career in prospect. He began by making its foundation as substantial as brains and energy would permit. So earnest, so successful was he that Grover & Dickhut regarded him as the most promising young man in New York. They predicted a great future for him, no small part of which was the ultimate alteration of an office shingle, the name of Rossiter going up in gilt, after that of Dickhut. And, above all, Rossiter was a handsome, likable chap. Tall, fair,



sunny-hearted, well groomed, he was a fellow that both sexes liked without much effort.

The Wharton trouble was bound to prove startling any way one looked at it. The prominence of the family, the baldness of its skeleton, and the gleeful eagerness with which it danced into full view left but little for meddlers to covet. A crash was inevitable; it was the *clash* that Grover & Dickhut were trying to avert. Old Wharton, worn to a slimmer frazzle than he had ever been before his luckless marriage, was determined to divorce his insolent younger half. It was to be done with as little noise as possible, more for his own sake than for

hers. Wharton was proud in, not of, his weakness.

It became necessary to "shadow" the fair débutante into matrimony. After weeks of indecision Mr. Wharton finally arose and swore in accents terrible that she was going too far to be called back. He determined to push, not to pull, on the reins. Grover & Dickhut were commanded to get the "evidence"; he would pay. When he burst in upon them and cried in his cracked treble that "the devil's to pay," he did not mean to cast any aspersion upon the profession in general or particular. He was annoyed.

"She's going away next week," he

exclaimed, as if the lawyers were to blame for it.

"Well, and what of it?" asked Mr. Grover blandly.

"Up into the mountains," went on Mr. Wharton triumphantly.

"Is it against the law?" smiled the old lawyer.

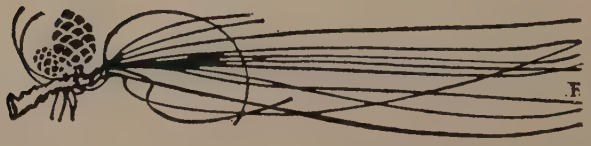
"Confound the law! I don't object to her going up into the mountains for a rest, but ——"

"It's much too hot in town for her, I fancy."

"How's that?" querulously. "But I've just heard that that scoundrel Havens is going to the mountains also."

"The same mountain?"

"Certainly. I have absolute proof of it. Now, something has to be done!"

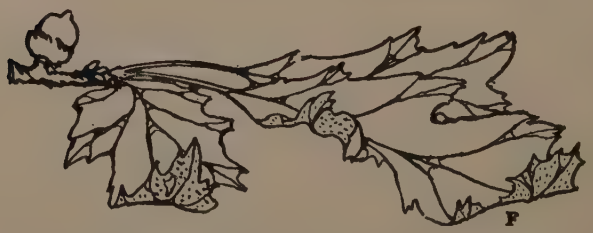


And so it was that the promising young lawyer, Samuel W. Rossiter, Jr., was sent northward into the Adirondacks one hot summer day with instructions to be tactful but thorough. He had never seen Mrs. Wharton, nor had he seen Havens. There was no time to look up these rather important details, for he was off to intercept her at the little station from which one drove by coach to the quiet summer hotel among the clouds. She was starting the same afternoon. He found himself wondering whether this petted butterfly of fashion had ever seen him, and, seeing him, had been suffi-

ciently interested to inquire, "Who is that tall fellow with the light hair?" It would be difficult to perform the duties assigned to him if either she or Havens knew him for what he was. His pride would have been deeply wounded if he had known that Grover & Dickhut recommended him to Wharton as "obscure."

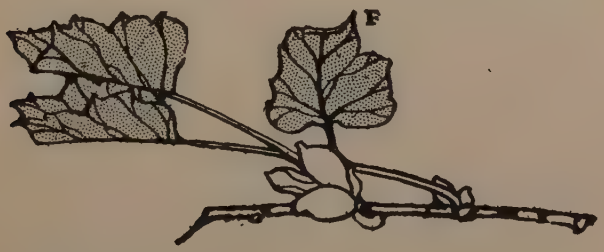
"They say she is a howling beauty as well as a swell," reflected Rossiter, as the miles and minutes went swinging by. "And that's something to be thankful for. One likes novelty, especially if it's feminine. Well, I'm out for the sole purpose of saving a million or so for old Wharton, and to save as much of her reputation as I can besides. With the

proof in hand the old duffer can scare her out of any claim against his bank account, and she shall have the absolute promise of 'no exposure' in return. Isn't it lovely? Well, here's Albany. Now for the dinky road up to Fossingford Station. I have an hour's wait here. She's coming on the afternoon train and gets to Fossingford at eleven-ten to-night. That's a dickens of a time for a young woman to be arriving anywhere, to say nothing of Fossingford."



Loafing about the depot at Albany, Rossiter kept a close lookout for Mrs. Wharton as he pictured her from the description he carried in his mind's eye. Her venerable husband informed him

that she was sure to wear a white shirt-waist, a gray skirt, and a Knox sailor hat,



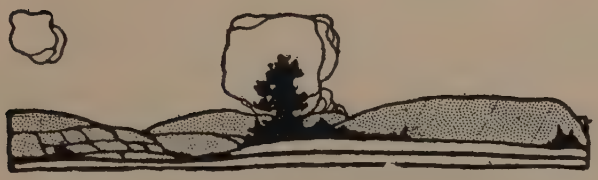
because her maid had told him so in a huff. But he was to identify her chiefly by means of a handsome and oddly trimmed parasol of deep purple. Wharton had every reason to suspect that it was a present from Havens, and therefore to be carried more for sentiment than protection.

A telegram awaited him at Fossingford Station. Fossingford was so small and unsophisticated that the arrival of a telegraphic message that did not relate to the movement of railroad trains was an "occasion." Everybody in town knew that a message had come for Samuel

Rossiter, and everybody was at the depot to see that he got it. The station agent had inquired at the "eating-house" for the gentleman, and that was enough. With the eyes of a Fossingford score or two upon him, Rossiter read the despatch from Grover & Dickhut.

"Too bad, ain't it?" asked the agent, compassionately regarding the newcomer. Evidently the contents were supposed to be disappointing.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Rossi-



ter easily. But just the same he was troubled in mind as he walked over and sat down upon his steamer trunk in the shade of the building. The telegram read:

"She left New York five-thirty this evening. Stops over night Albany. Fossingford to-morrow morning. Watch trains. Purple parasol. Sailor hat. Gray travelling suit.

"G. and D."

It meant that he would be obliged to stay in Fossingford all night — but where? A general but comprehensive glance did not reveal anything that looked like a hotel. He thought of going back to Albany for the night, but

it suddenly occurred to him that she might not stop in that city, after all. Pulling his wits together, he saw things with a new clearness of vision. Osten-

sibly she had announced her intention to spend the month at Eagle Nest, an obscure but delightful hotel in the hills; but did that really mean that she would go there? It was doubtless a ruse to throw the husband off the track. There were scores of places in the mountains, and it was more than probable that she would give Eagle Nest a wide berth. Rossiter patted his bump of perceptiveness and smiled serenely until he came plump up against the realization that she might not come by way of Fossingford

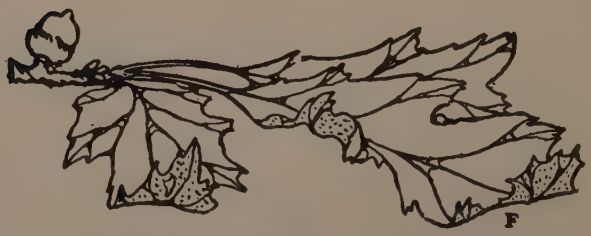
at all, or, in any event, she might go whisking through to some station farther north. His speculations came to an end in the shape of a distressing resolution. He would remain in Fossingford and watch the trains go by!

After he had dashed through several early evening trains, the cheerful, philosophical smile of courage left his face and trouble stared from his eyes. He saw awkward prospects ahead. Suppose she were to pass through on one of the late night trains! He could not rush through the sleepers, even though the trains stopped in Fossingford for water.

Besides, she could not be identified by means of a gray suit, a sailor hat, and a

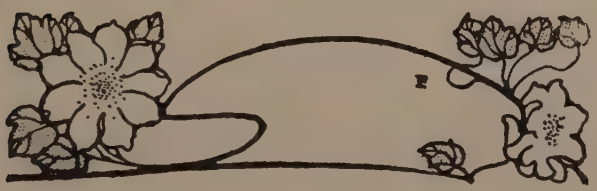
purple parasol if they were tucked away in the berth. At eleven o'clock he was pacing the little depot platform, waiting for the eleven-ten train, the last he was to inspect for the night. He had eaten a scanty meal at the restaurant nearby, and was still mad about it. The station agent slept soundly at his post, and all the rest of the town had gone to bed.

The train pulled in and out again, leaving him at the far end of the platform, mopping his harassed brow. He had visited the chair-cars and had seen



no one answering the description. A half-dozen passengers huddled off and wandered away in the darkness.

"I 'll bet my head she 's in one of those sleepers," he groaned, as he watched the lights on the rear coach fade away into



the night. "It 's all off till to-morrow, that 's settled. My only hope is that she really stopped in Albany. There 's a train through here at three in the morning; but I 'm not detective enough to unravel the mystery of any woman's berth. Now, where the deuce am *I* to sleep?"

As he looked about dismally, disconsolately, his hands deep in his pockets, his straw hat pulled low over his sleepy eyes, the station agent came up to him with a knowing grin on his face.

"'Scuse me, boss, but she's come," he said, winking.

"She? Who?"

"Her. The young lady. Sure! She's lookin' fer you over in the waitin'-room. You mus' 'a' missed her when she got off — thought she was n't comin' up till to-morrer. Mus' 'a' changed her mind. That's a woming all over, ain't it?"

Rossiter felt himself turn hot and cold. His head began to whirl and his courage went fluttering away. Here was a queer complication. The quarry hunting for the sleuth, instead of the reverse. He fanned himself with his hat for one brief, uncertain moment, dazed beyond belief. Then he resolutely strode over to face

the situation, trusting to luck to keep him from blundering his game into her hands. Just as he was about to put his foot upon the lamp-lit door-sill the solution struck him like a blow. She was expecting Havens to meet her!

There was but one woman in the room, and she was approaching the door with evident impatience as he entered. Both stopped short, she with a look of surprise, which changed to annoyance and then crept into an nervous, apologetic little smile; he with an unsuppressed ejaculation. She wore a gray skirt, a white waist, and a sailor hat, and she was surpassingly good to look at even in the trying light from the overhead lamp. Instinctively his eye swept

over her. She carried on her arm the light gray jacket, and in one hand was the tightly rolled parasol of—he impertinently craned

his neck to see — of purple! Mr. Rossiter was face to face with the woman he was to dog for a month, and he was flabbergasted. Even as he stopped, puzzled, before her, contemplating retreat, she spoke to him.

"Did that man send you to me?" she asked nervously, looking through the door beyond and then through a window at his right, quite puzzled, he could see.

"He did, and I was sure he was mistaken. I knew of no one in this God-forsaken place who could be asking for me," said he, collecting his wits carefully

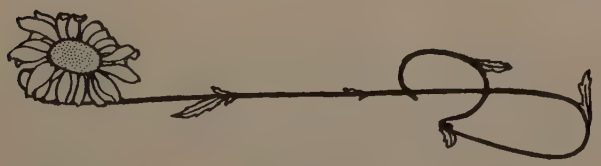
and herding them into that one sentence. "But perhaps I can help you. Will you tell me whom I am to look for?"

"It is strange he is not here," she said a little breathlessly. "I wired him just what train to expect me on."

"Your husband?" ventured he admirably.

"Oh, dear, no!" said she quickly.

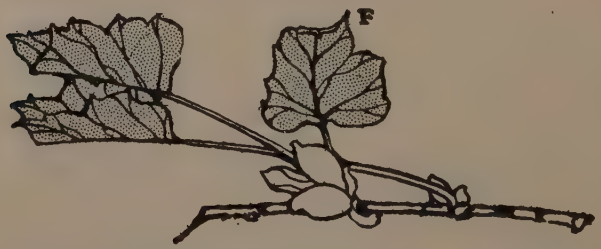
"I wish she'd wired me what train to expect her on," thought he grimly. "She does n't know me. That 's good. She was expecting Havens and he 's missed connections somehow," shot rapidly through



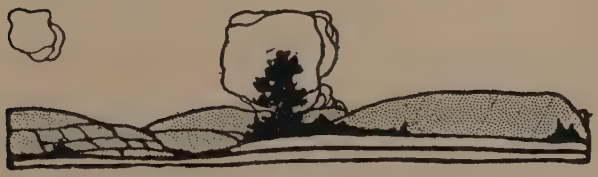
his brain. At the same time he was thinking of her as the prettiest woman he had seen in all his life. Then aloud:

"I'll look on the platform. Maybe he's lost in this great city. What name shall I call out?"

"Please don't call very loudly. You'll wake the dead," she said, with a pathetic smile. "It's awfully good of you. He may come at any minute, you know. His name is—is"—she hesitated for a second, and then went on determinedly—"Dudley. Tall, dark man. I don't know how I shall thank you. It's so very awkward."



Rossiter darted from her glorious but perplexed presence. He had never seen Havens, but he was sure he could recognize an actor if he saw him in Fossingford. And he would call him Dudley, too. It would be wise. The search



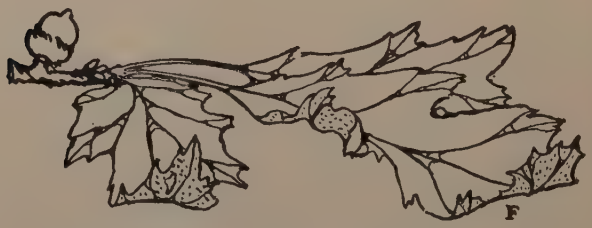
was fruitless. The only tall, dark object he saw was the mailcrane at the edge of the platform, but he facetiously asked if its name was Dudley. Receiving no answer, he turned back to cast additional woe into the heart of the pretty intriguer. She was standing in the door, despair in her eyes. Somehow he was pleased because he had not found the wretch. She was so fair to look upon and so appealing in her distress.

"You could n't find him? What am I to do? Oh, is n't it awful? He promised to be here."

"Perhaps he 's at a hotel."

"In Fossingford?" in deep disgust. "There 's no hotel here. He was to

drive me to the home of a friend out in the country." Rossiter leaned against the wall suddenly. There was a long silence. He could not find his tongue, but his eyes were burning deep into the plaintive blue ones that looked up into his face.



"I'll ask the agent," he said at last.

"Ask him what?" she cried anxiously.

"If he's been here. No, I'll ask if there's a place where you can sleep to-night. Mr. Dudley will surely turn up to-morrow."

"But I could n't sleep a wink. I feel like crying my eyes out," she wailed.

"Don't do that!" exclaimed he, in alarm. "I'll take another look outside."

"Please don't. He is not here. Will

you please tell me what I am to do?" — very much as if it was his business to provide for her in the hour of need.

Rossiter promptly awoke the agent and asked him where a room could be procured for the lady. Doxie's boarding-house was the only place, according to the agent, and it was full to overflowing. Besides, they would not "take in" strange women.

"She can sleep here in the waiting-room," suggested the agent. "They 'll let you sleep in the parlor over at Doxie's, mister — maybe."

Rossiter did not have the heart to tell her all that the agent said. He merely announced that there was no hotel except the depot waiting-room.

"By the way, does Mr. Dudley live out in the country?" he asked insidiously. She flushed and then looked at him narrowly.

"No. He 's visiting his uncle up here."

"Funny he missed you."

"It 's terribly annoying," she said coldly. Then she walked away from him as if suddenly conscious that she should not be conversing with a good-looking stranger at such a time and place and under such peculiar circumstances. He withdrew to the platform and his own reflections.

"He 's an infernal cad for not meeting her," he found himself saying, her pretty, distressed face still before him. "I don't

care a rap whether she 's doing right or wrong—she 's game. Still, she 's a blamed little fool to be travelling up here on such an outlandish train. So he 's visiting an

uncle, eh? Then the chances are they 're not going to Eagle Nest. Lucky I waited here—I 'd have lost them entirely if I 'd gone back to Albany. But where the deuce is she to sleep till morn—" He heard rapid footsteps behind him and turned to distinguish Mrs. Wharton as she approached dimly but gracefully. The air seemed full of her.

"Oh, Mr.—Mr.—" she was saying eagerly.

"Rollins."

"Is n't there a later train, Mr. Rollins?"

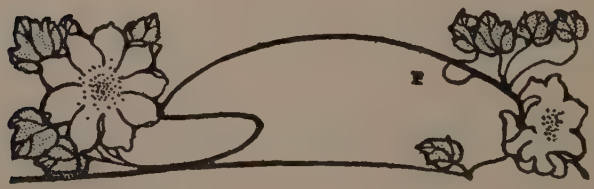
"I 'll ask the agent."

"There 's the flyer at three-thirty A. M.," responded the sleepy agent a minute later.

"I 'll just sit up and wait for it," she said coolly. "He has got the trains confused."

"Good heavens! Till three-thirty?"

"But my dear Mr. Rollins, you won't be obliged to sit up, you know. You 're not expecting any one, are you?"



"N–no, of course not."

"By the way, why *are* you staying up?" He was sure he detected alarm in the question. She was suspecting him!

"I have nowhere to go, Miss — Mrs. — er — " She merely smiled and he said something under his breath. "I 'm waiting for the eight o'clock train."

"How lovely! What time will the three-thirty train get here, agent?"

"At half-past three, I reckon. But she don't stop here!"

"Oh, goodness! Can't you flag it — her, I mean?"

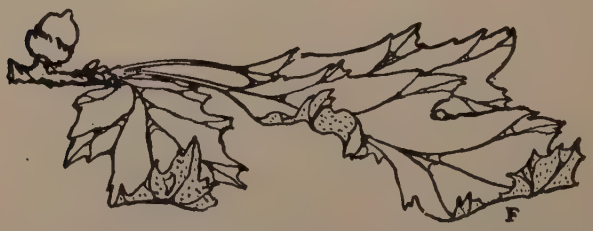
"What 's the use?" asked Rossiter. "He 's not coming on it, is he?"

"That 's so. He 's coming in a buggy. You need n't mind flagging her, agent."

"Well, say, I 'd like to lock up the place," grumbled the agent. "There 's

no more trains to-night but Number Seventeen, and she don't even whistle here. I can't set up here all night."

"Oh, you wouldn't lock me out in the night, would you?" she cried in such pretty despair that he faltered.



"I got to git home to my wife. She's ——"

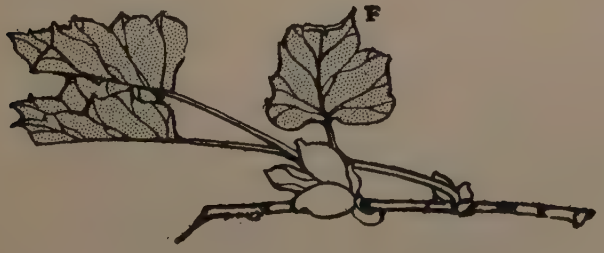
"That's all right, agent," broke in Rossiter hastily. "I'll take your place as agent. Leave the doors open and I'll go on watch. I have to stay up anyway."

There was a long silence. He did not know whether she was freezing or warming toward him, because he dared not look into her eyes.

"I don't know who you are," she said

distinctly but plaintively. It was very dark out there on the platform and the night air was growing cold.

"It is the misfortune of obscurity," he said mockingly. "I am a most humble wayfarer on his way to the high hills. If it will make you feel any more comfortable, madam, I will say that I don't know who you are. So, you see, we are in the same boat. You are waiting for a man and I am waiting for daylight. I sincerely trust you may not have as long to wait as I. Believe me, I regard myself as a gentleman. You are quite as safe with me as you will be with the agent, or with Mr. — Mr. Dudley, for that matter."



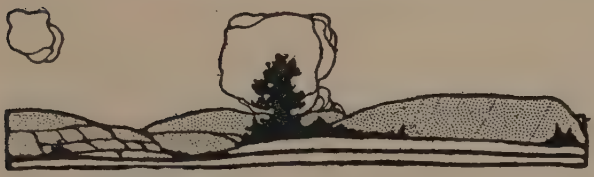
"You may go home to your wife, Mr. Agent," she said promptly. "Mr. Rollins will let the trains through, I 'm sure."

The agent stalked away in the night and the diminutive station was left to the mercy of the wayfarers.

"And now, Mr. Rollins, you may go over in that corner and stretch out on the bench. It will be springless, I know, but I fancy you can sleep. I will call you for the — for breakfast."

"I 'm hanged if you do. On the contrary, I 'm going to do my best to fix a comfortable place for you to take a nap. I 'll call you when Mr. Dudley comes."

"It 's most provoking of him," she



said, as he began rummaging through his steamer trunk. "What are you doing?"

"Hunting out something to make over into a mattress. You don't mind napping on my clothes, do you? Here's a soft suit of flannels, a heavy suit of cheviot, a dress suit, a spring coat, and a raincoat. I can rig up a downy couch in no time if——"

"Ridiculous! Do you imagine that I'm going to sleep on your best clothes? I'm going to sit up."

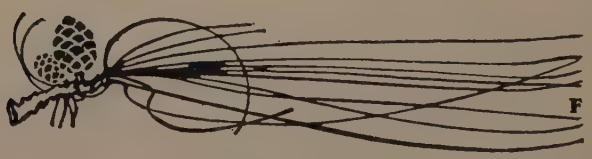
"You'll have to do as I say, madam, or be turned out of the hotel," said he, with an infectious grin.

"But I insist upon your lying down.

You have no reason for doing this for me. Besides, I 'm going to sit up. Good-night!"

"You are tired and ready to cry," he said, calmly going on with his preparations. She stood off defiantly and watched him pile his best clothes into a rather comfortable-looking heap on one of the long benches. "Now, if you don't mind, I 'll make a pillow of these negligée shirts. They 're soft, you know."

"Stop! I refuse to accept your—" she was protesting.



"Do you want me to leave you here all alone?" he demanded. "With the country full of tramps and ——"

"Don't! It 's cowardly of you to

frighten me. They say the railroads are swarming with tramps, too. Won't you please go and see if Mr. Dudley is anywhere in sight?"

"It was mean of me, I confess. Please lie down. It's getting cold. Pull this raincoat over yourself. I'll walk out and ——"

"Oh, but you are a determined person. And very foolish, too. Why should you lose a lot of sleep just for me when ——?"

"There is no reason why two men should fail you to-night, Mrs. — Miss ——"

"Miss Dering," she said, humbled.

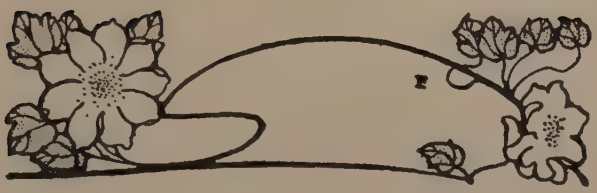
"When you choose to retire, Miss Dering, you will find your room quite ready," he said with fine gallantry,

bowing low as he stood in the doorway. "I will be just outside on the platform, so don't be uneasy."

He quickly faded into the night, leaving her standing there, petulant, furious, yet with admiration in her eyes. Ten minutes later he heard her call. She was sitting on the edge of the improvised couch, smiling sweetly, even timidly.

"It must be cold out there. You must wear this."

She came toward him, the raincoat in one hand, the purple parasol in the other. He took the parasol only and departed without a word. She gasped and would have called after him, but there was no



use. With a perplexed frown and smile she went slowly, dubiously toward the folded bed.

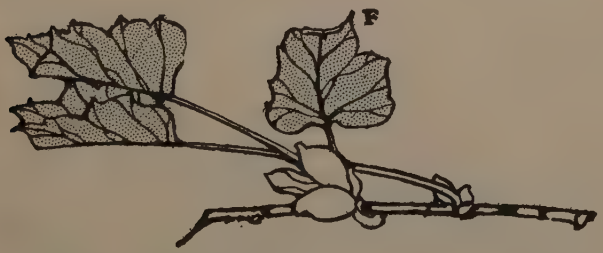
Rossiter smoked three cigars and walked two miles up and down the platform, swinging the parasol absent-mindedly, before he ventured to look inside the room again. In that time he had asked and answered many questions in his mind. He saw that it would be necessary to change his plans if he was to watch her successfully. She evidently gave out Eagle Nest to blind her husband. Somehow he was forgetting that the task before him was disagreeable and undignified. What troubled him most was how to

follow them if Havens—or Dudley—put in an appearance for the three-thirty train. He began to curse Everett Havens softly but potently.

When he looked into the waiting-room she was sound asleep on the bench. It delighted him to see that she had taken him at his word and was lying upon his clothes. Cautiously he took a seat on the door-sill. The night was as still as death and as lonesome as the grave. For half an hour he sat gazing upon the tired, pretty face and the lithe young figure of the sleeper. He found himself dreaming, although he was wide awake—never more so. It occurred to him that he would be immensely pleased to hear that Havens's

reason for failing her was due to an accident in which he had been killed.

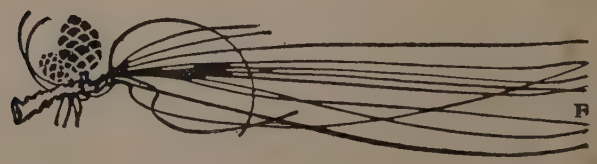
"Those clothes will have to be pressed the first thing to-morrow," he said to himself, but without a trace of annoyance. "Hang it all, she doesn't look like that sort of woman," his mind switched. "But just think of being tied up to an old crocodile like Wharton! Gee! One oughtn't to blame her!"



Then he went forth into the night once more and listened for the sound of buggy wheels. It was almost time for the arrival of the belated man from the country, and he was beginning to pray that he would not appear at all. It came to his mind that he should advise her to return to

New York in the morning. At last his watch told him that the train was due to pass in five minutes. And still no buggy! Good! He felt an exhilaration that threatened to break into song.

Softly he stole back into the waiting-room, prepared to awaken her before the train shot by. Something told him that the rumble and roar would terrify her if she were asleep. Going quite close to her he bent forward and looked long and sadly upon the perfect face. Her hair was somewhat disarranged, her hat



had a very hopeless tilt, her lashes swept low over the smooth cheek, but there was an almost imperceptible choke in her breathing. In her small white hand

"Going quite close to her he bent forward and looked long and sadly upon the perfect face"

she clasped a handkerchief tightly, and — yes, he was sure of it — there were tear-stains beneath her lashes. There came to him the faint sob which lingers

long in the breath of one who has cried herself to sleep. The spy passed his hand over his brow, sighed, shook his head and turned away irresolutely. He remembered that she was waiting for a man who was not her husband.

Far down the track a bright star came shooting toward Fossingford. He knew it to be the headlight of the flyer. With a breath of relief he saw that he was the only human being on the platform. Havens had failed again. This time he approached the recumbent one deter-

minedly. She was awake the instant he touched her shoulder.

"Oh," she murmured, sitting erect and looking about, bewildered. "Is it — has he — oh, you are still here? Has he come?"

"No, Miss Dering, he is not here," and added, under his breath, "damn him!" Then aloud, "The train is coming."

"And he did n't come?" she almost wailed.

"I fancy you 'd better try to sleep until morning. There 's nothing to stay awake for," although it came with a pang.

"Absolutely nothing," she murmured, and his pride took a respectful tumble.

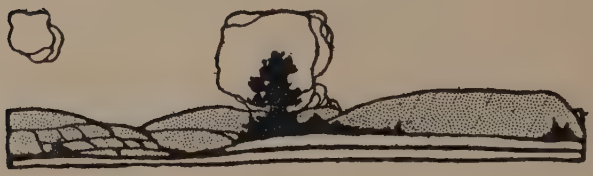
As she began to rearrange her hair, rather clumsily spoiling a charming effect, he remonstrated.

"Don't bother about your hair." She looked at him in wonder for an instant, a little smile finally creeping to her lips. He felt that she understood something. "Maybe he 'll come after all," he added quickly.

"What are you doing with my parasol?" she asked sleepily.

"I 'm carrying it to establish your identity with Dudley if he happens to come. He 'll recognize the purple parasol, you know."

"Oh, I see," she said dubiously. "He gave it to me for a birthday present."



"I knew it," he muttered.

"What?"

"I mean I knew he'd recognize it," he explained.

The flyer shot through Fossingford at that juncture, a long line of roaring shadows. There was silence between them until the rumble was lost in the distance.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to go out on the platform for awhile," she said finally, resignation in her eyes. "Perhaps he's out there, wondering why the train didn't stop."

"It's cold out there. Just slip into my coat, Miss Dering." He held the raincoat for her, and she mechanically

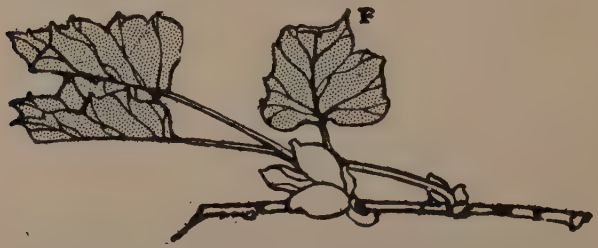
slipped her arms into the sleeves. She shivered, but smiled sweetly up at him.

"Thank you, Mr. Rollins, you are very thoughtful and very kind to me."

They walked out into the darkness. After a turn or two in silence she took the arm he proffered. He admired the bravery with which she was trying to convince him that she was not so bitterly disappointed. When she finally spoke her voice was soft and cool, just as a woman's always is before the break.

"He was to have taken me to his uncle's house, six miles up in the country. His aunt and a young lady from the South, with Mr. Dudley and me, are to go to Eagle Nest to-morrow for a month."

"How very odd," he said with well-assumed surprise. "I, too, am going to Eagle Nest for a month or so."



She stopped stock-still, and he could feel that she was staring at him hardly.

"You are going there?" she half whispered.

"They say it is a quiet, restful place," he said. "One reaches it by stage overland, I believe." She was strangely silent during the remainder of the walk. Somehow he felt amazingly sorry for her. "I hope I may see something of you while we are there," he said at last.

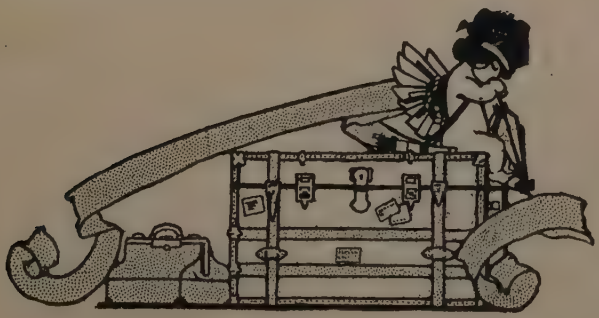
"I imagine I could n't help it if I were to try," she said. They were in the path of the light from the window, and he saw

the strange little smile on her face. "I think I 'll lie down again. Won't you find a place to sleep, Mr. Rollins? I can't bear the thought of depriving you ——"

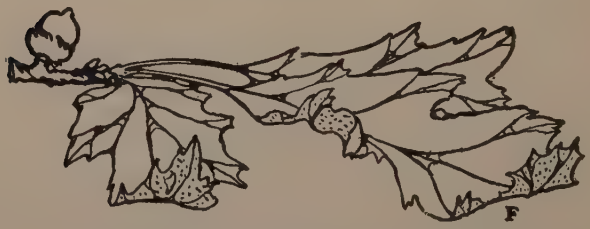
"I am the slave of your darkness," he said gravely.

She left him, and he lit another cigar. Daylight came at last to break up his thoughts, and then his tired eyes began to look for the man and buggy. Fatigued and weary, he sat upon his steamer trunk, his back to the wall. There he fell sound asleep.

He was awakened by some one shaking him gently by the shoulder.



"You are a very sound sleeper, Mr. Rollins," said a familiar voice, but it was gay and sprightly. He looked up blankly, and it was a full half-minute before he could get his bearings.



A young woman with a purple parasol stood beside him, laughing merrily, and at her side was a tall, dark, very good-looking young man.

"I could n't go without saying good-by to you, Mr. Rollins, and thanking you again for the care you have taken of me," she was saying. He finally saw the little gloved hand that was extended toward him. Her companion was carrying her jacket and the little travelling-bag.

"Oh — er — good-by, and don't men-

tion it," he stammered, struggling to his feet. "Was I asleep?"

"Asleep at your post, sir. Mr. Dudley — oh, this is Mr. Dudley, Mr. Rollins — came in ten minutes ago and found — us — both — asleep."

"Isn't it lucky Mr. Dudley happens to be an honest man?" said Rossiter, in a manner so strange that the smile froze on the face of the other man. The unhappy barrister caught the quick glance that passed between them, and was vaguely

convinced that they had been discussing him while he slept. Something whispered to him that they had guessed the nature of his business.

"My telegram was not delivered to him

until this morning. Wasn't it provoking?" she was saying.

"What time is it now?" asked Rossiter.

"Half-past seven," responded Dudley rather sharply. His black eyes were fastened steadily upon those of the questioner. "Mr. Van Haltford's man came in and got Miss Dering's telegram yesterday, but it was not delivered to me until a neighbor came to the house with both the message and messenger in charge. Joseph had drunk all the whisky in Fossingford.

"Then there's no chance for me to get a drink, I suppose," said Rossiter with a wry smile.

"Do you need one?" asked Miss Dering saucily.

"I have a headache."

"A pick-me-up is what you want," said Dudley coldly.

"My dear sir, I have n't been drunk," remonstrated Rossiter sharply. His hearers laughed and he turned red but cold with resentment.

"See, Mr. Rollins, I have smoothed out your clothes and folded them," she said, pointing to her one-time couch. "I could n't pack them in your trunk because you were sitting on it. Shall I help you now?"

"No, I thank you," he said ungraciously. "I can toss 'em in any old way."

He set about doing it without another word. His companions stood over near the window and conversed earnestly in words too low for him to distinguish. From the corner of his eye he could see that Dudley's face was hard and uncompromising, while hers was eager and imploring. The man was stubbornly objecting to something, and she was just as decided in an opposite direction.

"He 's finding fault and she 's trying to square it with him. Oh, my beauties, you 'll have a hard time to shake off one Samuel Rossiter. They 're suspicious — or he is, at least. Some one has tipped me off to them, I fancy."

"I 'm sorry they are so badly mussed, Mr. Rollins, but they did make a very comfortable bed," she said, walking over to him. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were gleaming. "You are going to Eagle Nest to-day?"

"Just as soon as I can get a conveyance. There is a stage-coach at nine, Miss Dering."

"We will have room for you on our break," she said simply. Her eyes met his bravely and then wavered. Rossiter's heart gave a mighty leap.

"Permit me to second Miss Dering's invitation," said Dudley, coming over. The suggestion of a frown on his face

made Rossiter only too eager to accept the unexpected invitation. "My aunt

and Miss Crozier are outside with the coachman. You can have your luggage sent over in the stage. It is fourteen miles by road, so we should be under way, Mr. Rollins."

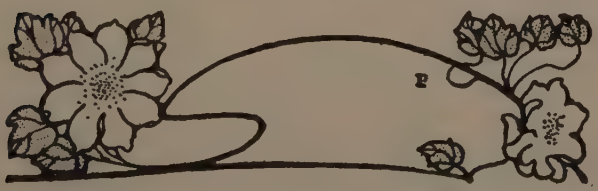
As Rossiter followed them across the platform he was saying to himself:

"Well, the game 's on. Here 's where I begin to earn my salary. I 'll hang out my sign when I get back to New York: 'Police Spying. Satisfaction guaranteed. References given.' Hang it all, I hate to do this to her. She 's an awfully good sort, and — and — But I don't like this damned Havens!"

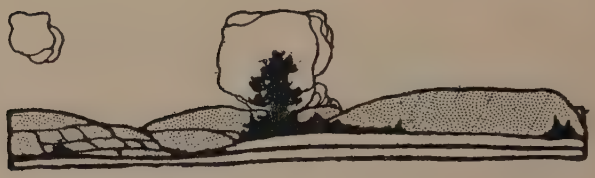
Almost before he knew it he was being presented to two handsome, fashionably dressed young women who sat together in the rear seat of the big mountain break.

"Every cloud has its silver lining," Miss Dering was saying. "Let me present you to Mr. Dudley's aunt, Mrs. Van Haltford, and to Miss Crozier, Mr. Rollins."

In a perfect maze of emotions, he found himself bowing before the two ladies, who smiled distantly and uncertainly. Dudley's aunt? That dashing young creature his aunt? Rossiter was staggered by the



boldness of the claim. He could scarce restrain the scornful, brutal laugh of derision at this ridiculous play upon his



credulity. To his secret satisfaction he discovered that the entire party seemed nervous and ill at ease. There was a trace of confusion in their behavior. He heard Miss Dering explain that he was to accompany the party and he saw the poorly concealed look of disapproval and polite inquiry that went between the two ladies and Dudley. There was nothing for it, however, now that Miss Dering had committed herself, and he was advised to look to his luggage without delay.

He hurried into the station to arrange for the transportation of his trunk by stage, all the while smiling maliciously in his sleeve. Looking surreptitiously from

a window he saw the quartet, all of them now on the break, arguing earnestly over — him, he was sure. Miss Dering was plaintively facing the displeasure of the trio. The coachman's averted face wore a half-grin. The discussion ended abruptly as Rossiter reappeared, but there was a coldness in the air that did not fail to impress him as portentous.

"I 'm the elephant on their hands — the proverbial hot coal," he thought wickedly. "Well, they 've got to bear it even if they can't grin." Then aloud cheerily: "All aboard! We 're off!" He took his seat beside the driver.

II

THE events of the ensuing week are best chronicled by the reproduction of Rossiter's own diary or report, with liberties in the shape of an author's comments.

THURSDAY.

"Settled comfortably in Eagle Nest House. Devilish rugged and out-of-the-way place. Mrs. Van Haltford is called Aunt Josephine. She and Miss Debby Crozier have rooms on the third floor. Mine is next to theirs, Havens's is next to mine, and Mrs. Wharton has two rooms

beyond his. We are not unlike a big family party. They 're rather nice to me. I go walking with Aunt Josephine. I don't understand why I 'm sandwiched in between Havens and Aunt Josephine. Otherwise the arrangement is neat. There is a veranda outside our windows. We sit upon it. Aunt Josephine is a great bluff, but she 's clever. She 's never napping. I 've tried to pump her. Miss Crozier is harmless. She does n't care. Havens never takes his eyes off Mrs. W. when they are together. She looks at him a good bit, too. They don't pay much attention to me. Aunt Josephine's husband is very old and very busy. He can't take vacations. Everybody went

to bed early to-night. No evidence to-day."

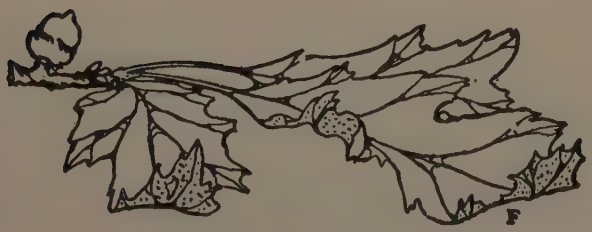
FRIDAY NIGHT.

"Havens and Mrs. W. went hill-climbing this afternoon and were gone for an hour before I missed them. Then I took Aunt Jo and Debby out for a quick climb. Confound Aunt Jo! She got tired in ten minutes and Debby would n't go on without her. I think it was a put-up job. The others did n't return till after six. She asked me if I 'd like to walk about the grounds after dinner. Said I would. We did. Havens went with us. Could n't shake him to save my life."

"'Havens and Mrs. W. went hill-climbing this afternoon'"

SATURDAY NIGHT.

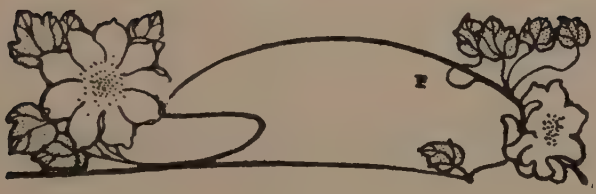
"I have to watch myself constantly to keep from calling her Mrs. Wharton. I believe writing her real name is bad policy. It makes me forget. After this I shall call her Miss Dering, and I'll speak of him as Dudley. This morning he asked me to call him 'Jim.' He calls me 'Sam.' Actors do get familiar. When she came downstairs to go driving with him this morning I'll swear she was the prettiest thing I ever saw. They took a lunch and were gone for hours. I'd like to punch his face. She was very quiet all evening, and I fancied she avoided me. I smelt liquor on his breath just before bedtime.



"*One A. M.* — I thought everybody had gone to bed, but they are out there on the veranda talking. Just outside her windows. I distinctly heard him call her 'dearest.' Something must have alarmed them, for they parted abruptly. He walked the veranda for an hour, all alone. Plenty of evidence."

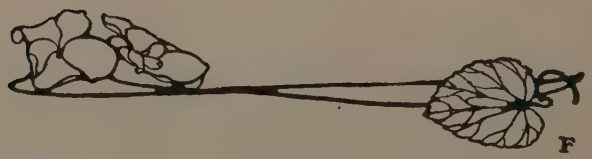
SUNDAY NIGHT.

"For appearance's sake he took Miss Crozier for a walk to-day. I went to the chapel down the hill with Miss Dering and Aunt Josephine. Aunt Josephine



put a ten-dollar bill in the box. Thinks she 's squaring herself with the Lord, I suppose. Miss Dering was not at all talkative and gave every sign of being uncomfortable because he had the audacity to go walking with another girl. In the afternoon she complained of being ill and went to her room. Later on she sent for Dudley and Mrs. Van Haltford. They were in her room all afternoon. I smoked on the terrace with Debby. She is the most uninteresting girl I ever met. But she 's on to their game. I know it because she forgot herself once, when I mentioned Miss Dering's illness, and said: 'Poor girl! She is in a most trying position. Don't you think Mr. Dudley is a splendid

fellow?' I said that he was very good-looking, and she seemed to realize she had said something she ought not to have said and shut up. I 'm sorry she 's sick, though. I miss that parasol dreadfully. She always has it, and I can see her a mile away. Usually he carries it, though. Well, I suppose he has a right — as original owner. Jim and I smoked together this evening, but he evidently smells a mouse. He did not talk much, and I caught him eying me strangely several times."



F

MONDAY NIGHT.

"Dudley has departed. I believe they are on to me. He went to Boston this

afternoon, and he actually was gruff with me just before leaving. The size of the matter is, some one has posted him, and they are all up to my game as a spy. I wish I were out of it. Never was so ashamed of a thing in my life; don't feel like looking any one in the face.

They 've all been nice to me. But what 's the difference? They 're all interested. She went to the train with him and — the rest of us. I 'll never forget how sad she looked as she held his hand and bade him good-by. I carried the parasol back to the hotel, and I know I hurt her feelings when I maliciously said that it would look well with a deep black border. She almost looked a hole through me. Fine

eyes. I don't know what is coming next. She is liable to slip out from under my eye at any time and fly away to meet him somewhere else. I telegraphed this message to Grover & Dickhut:

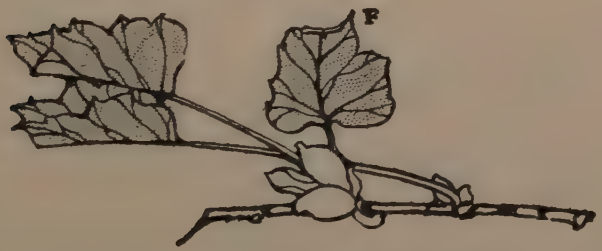
"He has gone. She still here. What shall I do?

"Got this answer:

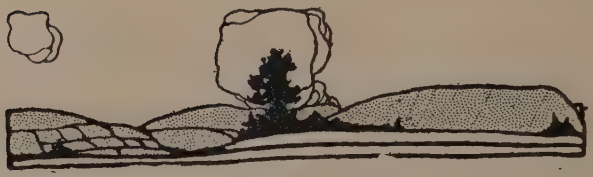
"Stay there and watch. They suspect you. Don't let her get away.

"But how the devil am I to watch day and night?"

The next week was rather an uneventful one for Rossiter. There was no sign of Havens and no effort on her part to leave Eagle Nest.



As the days went by he became more and more vigilant. In fact, his watch was incessant and very much of a personal one. He walked and drove with her, and he invented all sorts of excuses to avoid Mrs. Van Haltford and Miss Crozier. The purple parasol and he had become almost inseparable friends. The fear that Havens might return at any time kept him in a fever of anxiety and dread. Now that he was beginning to know her for himself he could not endure the thought that she



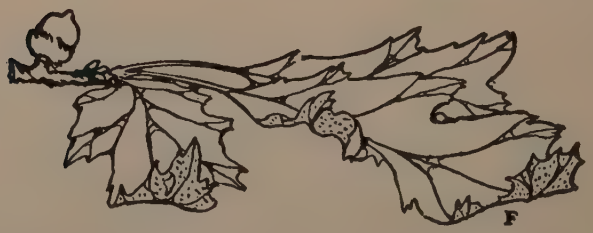
cared for another man. Strange to say, he did not think of her husband. Old Wharton had completely faded from his mind; it was Havens that he envied. He saw himself sinking into her net, falling before her wiles, but he did not rebel.

He went to bed each night apprehensive that the next morning should find him alone and desolate at Eagle Nest, the bird flown. It hurt him to think that she would laugh over her feat of outwitting him. He was not guarding her for old Wharton now; he was in his own employ. All this time he knew it was wrong, and that she was trifling with him while the other was away. Yet he had eyes, ears, and a heart like all men, and they were

for none save the pretty wife of Godfrey Wharton.

He spoke to her on several occasions of Dudley and gnashed his teeth when he saw a look of sadness, even longing, come into her dark eyes. At such times he was tempted to tell her that he knew all, to confound her by charging her with guilt. But he could not collect the courage. For some unaccountable reason he held his bitter tongue. And so it was that handsome Sam Rossiter, spy and good fellow, fell in love with a woman who had a very dark page in her history.

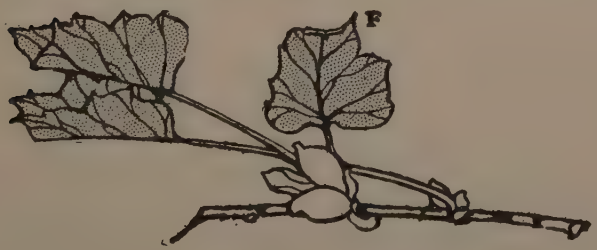
She received mail, of course, daily, but he was not sneak enough to pry into its secrets, even had the chance presented itself. Sometimes she tossed the letters away carelessly, but he observed that there were some which she guarded jealously.



Once he heard her tell Aunt Josephine that she had a letter from "Jim." He began to discover that "Jim" was a forbidden subject and that he was not discussed; at least, not in his presence. Many times he saw the two women in earnest, rather cautious conversation, and instinctively felt that Havens was the subject. Mrs. Wharton appeared piqued and discontented after these little talks. He made

this entry in his diary one night, a week after Havens went away:

"I almost wish he'd come back and end the suspense. This thing is wearing on me. I was weighed to-day and I've lost ten pounds. Mrs. Van Haltford says I look hungry and advises me to try salt-water air. I'm hanged if I don't give up the job this week. I don't like it, anyhow. It does n't seem square to be down here enjoying her society, taking her walking and all that, and all the time hunting up something with which to ruin



her forever. I'll stick the week out, but I'm not decided whether I'll produce any evidence against her if the Wharton *vs.*

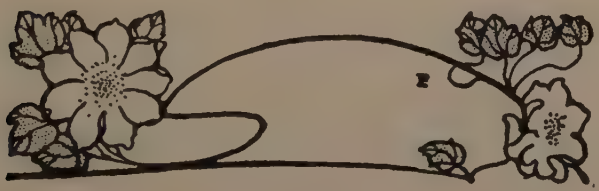
Wharton case ever does come to trial. I don't believe I could. I don't want to be a sneak."

One day Rossiter and the purple parasol escorted the pretty trifler over the valley to Bald Top, half a mile from the hotel. Mrs. Van Haltford and Miss Crozier were to join them later and were to bring with them Colonel Deming and Mr. Vincent, two friends who had lately arrived. The hotel was rapidly filling with fashionable guests, and Mrs. Wharton had petulantly observed, a day or two before, that the place was getting crowded and she believed she would go away soon. On the way over she said to him:

"I have about decided to go down to Velvet Springs for the rest of the month. Don't you think it is getting rather crowded here?"

"I have been pretty well satisfied," he replied, in an injured tone. "I don't see why you should want to leave here."

"Why should I stay if I am tired of the place?" she asked demurely, casting a roguish glance at his sombre face. He clenched the parasol and grated his teeth.



"She 's leading me on, confound her!" he thought. At the same time his head whirled and his heart beat a little faster. "You should n't," he said, "if you are tired. There 's more of an attraction at Velvet Springs, I suppose."

"Have you been there?"

"No."

"You answered rather snappishly. Have you a headache?"

"Pardon me; I did n't intend to answer snappishly, as you call it. I only wanted to be brief."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to change the subject."

"Shall we talk of the weather?"

"I suppose we may as well," he said resignedly. She was plainly laughing at him now. "Look here," he said, stopping and looking into her eyes intently and somewhat fiercely, "why do you want to go to Velvet Springs?"

"Why should you care where I go?" she answered blithely, although her eyes wavered.

"It 's because you are unhappy here and because some one else is there. I 'm not blind, Mrs. — Miss Dering."

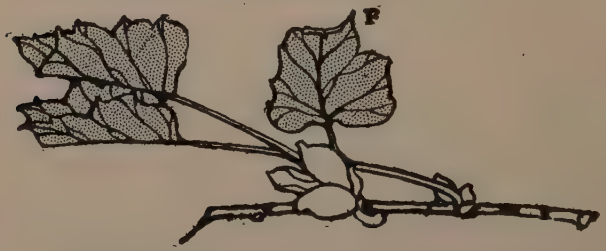
"You have no right to talk to me in that manner, Mr. Rollins. Come, we are to go back to the hotel at once," she said coldly. There was steel in her eyes.

He met her contemptuous look for a moment and quailed.

"I beg your pardon. I am a fool, but you have made me such," he said baldly.

"I? I do not understand you," and he could not but admire the clever, innocent, widespread eyes.

"You will understand me some day," he said, and to his amazement she flushed and looked away. They continued their walk, but there was a strange shyness in her manner that puzzled him.



"When is Dudley expected back here?" he asked abruptly.

She started sharply and gave him a quick, searching look. There was a guilty expression in her eyes, and he muttered something ugly under his breath.

"I do not know, Mr. Rollins," she answered.

"When did you hear from him last?" he demanded half savagely.

"I do not intend to be catechized by you, sir," she exclaimed, halting abruptly.

"'I do not intend to be catechized by you, sir'"

"We shall go back. You are very ugly to-day and I am surprised."

"I supposed you had letters from him every day," he went on ruthlessly. She gave him a look in which he saw pain and the shadow of tears, and then she turned and walked swiftly toward the hotel. His conscience smote him and he turned after her. For the next ten minutes he was on his knees, figuratively, pleading for forgiveness. At last she paused and smiled sweetly into his face. Then she calmly turned and resumed the journey to Bald Top, saying demurely:

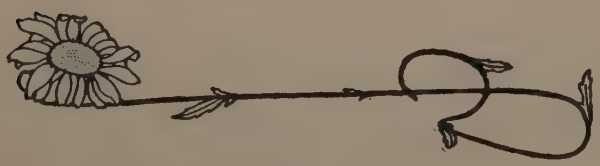
"We have nearly a quarter of a mile to retrace, all because you were so hateful."

"And you so obdurate," he added blissfully. He had tried to be severe and angry with her and had failed.

That very night the expected came to pass. Havens appeared on the scene, the same handsome, tragic-looking fellow, a trifle care-worn perhaps, but still — an evil genius. Rossiter ran plump into him in the hallway and was speechless for a moment. He unconsciously shook hands with the new arrival, but his ears were ringing so with the thuds of his heart that he heard but few of the brisk words addressed to him. After the eager actor had left him standing humbly in the hall he managed to recall part of what had been said. He had come up on the express

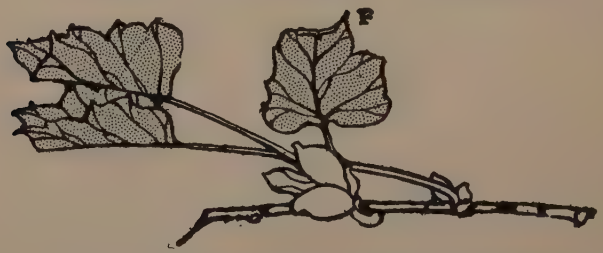
from Boston and could stay but a day or two. Did Mr. Rossiter know whether Miss Dering was in her room? The barrister also distinctly remembered that he did not ask for his aunt, which would have been the perfectly natural query.

Half an hour later Havens was strolling about the grounds, under the lamp lights, in and out of dark nooks, and close beside him was a slim figure in white. Their conversation was earnest, their manner secretive; that much the harassed Rossiter could see from the balcony. His heart



grew sore and he could almost feel the tears of disappointment surging to his eyes. A glance in his mirror had shown him a face haggard and drawn, eyes

strange and bright. He had not slept well, he knew; he had worn himself out in this despicable watch; he had grown to care for the creature he had been hired to spy upon. No wonder he was haggard.

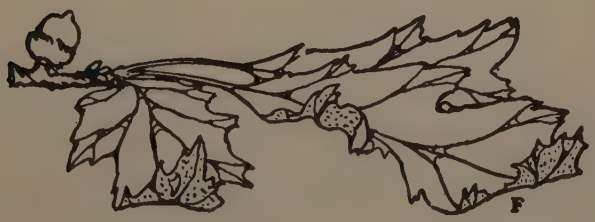


Now he was jealous—madly, fiendishly jealous. In his heart there was the savage desire to kill the other man and to denounce the woman. Pacing the grounds about the hotel, he soon worked himself into a fever, devilish in its hotness. More than once he passed them, and it was all he could do to refrain from springing upon them. At length he did what most men do: he took a drink. Whisky flew down his throat and to his brain. In his mind's eye he saw her in the other's arms — and

he could bear it no longer! Rushing to his room, he threw himself on the bed and cursed.

"Good heaven! I love her! I love her better than all the world! I can't stay here and see any more of it! By thunder, I'll go back to New York and they can go to the devil! So can old Wharton! And so can Grover & Dickhut!"

He leaped to his feet, dashed headlong to the telegraph office downstairs, and ten minutes later this message was flying to Grover & Dickhut:



Get some one else for this job. I'm done with it. Coming home. — SAM.

"I 'm coming on the first train, too," muttered the sender, as he hurried upstairs. "I can pack my trunk for the night stage. I 'd like to say good-by to her, but I can't — I could n't stand it. What 's the difference? She won't care whether I go or stay — rather have me go. If I were to meet her now I 'd — yes, by George — kiss her! It 's wrong to love her, but ——"

There was nothing dignified about the manner in which big Sam Rossiter packed his trunk. He fairly stamped the clothing into it and did a lot of other absurd things. When he finally locked it and yanked out

his watch his brow was wet and he was trembling. It had taken just five minutes to do the packing. His hat was on the back of his head, his collar was melting, and his cigar was chewed to a pulp. Cane and umbrella were yanked from behind the door and he was ready to fly. The umbrella made him think of a certain parasol, and his heart grew still and cold with the knowledge that he was never to carry it again.

"I hope I don't meet any of 'em," he muttered, pulling himself together and rushing into the hall. A porter had already jerked his trunk down the stair steps.

As he hastened after it he heard the swish of skirts and detected in the air a familiar odor, the subtle scent of a perfume that he could not forget were he to live a thousand years. The next moment she came swiftly around a corner in the hall, hurrying to her rooms. They met and both started in surprise, her eyes falling to his travelling-bag, and then lifting to his face in bewilderment. He checked his hurried flight and she came quite close to him. The lights in the hall were dim and the elevator car had dropped to regions below.

"Where are you going?" she asked in some agitation.

"I am going back to New York," he

answered, controlling himself with an effort. She was so beautiful, there in the dim hallway.

"To-night?" she asked in very low tones.

"In half an hour."

"And were you going without saying good-by to — to us?" she went on rapidly.

He looked steadily down into her solemn eyes for a moment and an expression of pain, of longing, came into his own.

"It could n't make any difference whether I said good-by to you, and it would have been hard," he replied unsteadily.

"Hard? I don't understand you," she said.

"I didn't want to see you. Yes, I hoped to get away before you knew anything about it. Maybe it was cowardly, but it was the best way," he cried bitterly.

"What do you mean?" she cried, and he detected alarm, confusion, guilt in her manner.

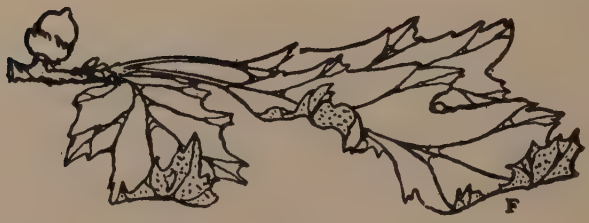
"You know what I mean. I know everything — I knew it before I came here, before I saw you. It's why I am here, I'm ashamed to say. But, have no fear — have no fear! I've given up the job — the nasty job — and you can do as you please. The only trouble is that I have been caught in the web; I've been trapped myself. You've made me care for you. That's why I'm giving it all up. Don't

look so frightened—I'll promise to keep your secret."

Her eyes were wide, her lips parted, but no words came; she seemed to shrink from him as if he were the headsman and she his victim.

"I'll do it, right or wrong!" he gasped suddenly. And in an instant his satchel clattered to the floor and his arms were straining the slight figure to his breast. Burning lips met hers and sealed them tight. She shivered violently, struggled for an instant in his mad em-

brace, but made no outcry. Gradually her free arm stole upward and around his neck and her lips responded to the passion in his. His kiss of ecstasy was returned.



The thrill of joy that shot through him was almost overpowering. A dozen times he kissed her. Unbelieving, he held her from him and looked hungrily into her eyes. They were wet with tears.

"Why do you go? I love you!" she whispered faintly.

Then came the revulsion. With an oath he threw her from him. Her hands went to her temples and a moan escaped her lips.

"Bah!" he snarled. "Get away from me! Heaven forgive me for being as weak as I've been to-night!"

"Sam!" she wailed piteously.

"Don't tell me anything! Don't try

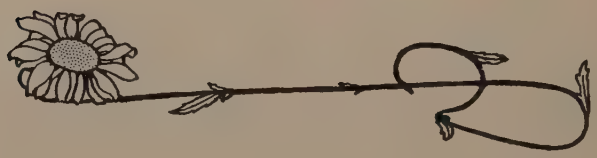
to explain! Be honest with one man, at least!"

"You must be insane!" she cried tremulously.

"Don't play innocent, madam. I *know*." In abject terror she shrank away from him. "But I have kissed you! If I live a thousand years I shall not forget its sweetness."

He waved his hands frantically above her, grabbed up his suit-case and traps, and, with one last look at the petrified woman shrinking against the wall under

the blasts of his vituperation, he dashed for the stairway. And so he left her, a forlorn, crushed figure.



Blindly he tore downstairs and to the counter. He hardly knew what he was doing as he drew forth his pocket-book to pay his account.

"Going away, Mr. Rollins?" inquired the clerk, glancing at the clock. It was eleven-twenty and the last stage-coach left for Fossingford at eleven-thirty, in time to catch the seven o'clock down train.

"Certainly," was the excited answer.

"A telegram came a few moments ago for you, sir, but I thought you were in bed," and the other tossed a little envelope out to him. Mechanically Rossiter tore

it open. He was thinking of the cowering woman in the hallway and he was cursing himself for his brutality.

He read the despatch with dizzy eyes and drooping jaw, once, twice, thrice. Then he leaned heavily against the counter and a coldness assailed his heart, so bitter that he felt his blood freezing. It read :

What have you been doing? The people you were sent to watch sailed for Europe ten days ago.

GROVER & DICKHUT.

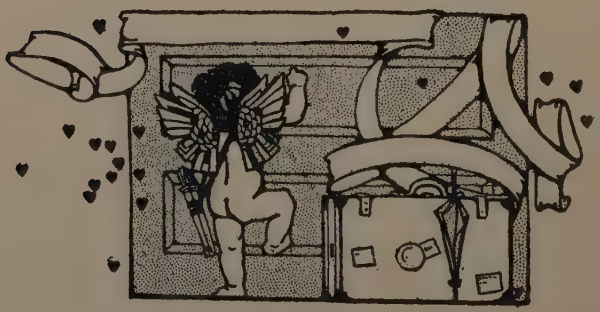
The paper fell from his trembling fingers, but he regained it, natural instinct inspiring a fear that the clerk would read it.

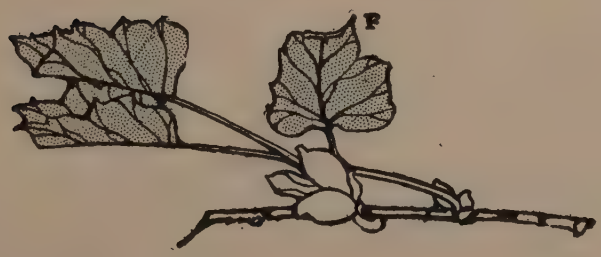
"Good Lord!" he gasped.

"Bad news, Mr. Rollins?" asked the clerk sympathetically, but the stricken, bewildered man did not answer.

What did it mean? A vast faintness attacked him as the truth began to penetrate. Out of the whirling mystery came the astounding, ponderous realization that he had blundered, that he had wronged her, that he had accused her of— Oh, that dear, stricken figure in the hallway above!

He leaped to the staircase. Three steps at a time he flew back to the scene





of the miserable tragedy. What he thought, what he felt as he rushed into the hallway can only be imagined. She was gone — heartbroken, killed! And she had kissed him and said she loved him!

A light shone through the transoms over the doors that led into her apartments. Quaking with fear, he ran down the hall and beat a violent tattoo upon her parlor door. Again he rapped, crazed by remorse, fear, love, pity, shame, and a hundred other emotions.

"Who is it?" came in stifled tones from within.

"It is I — Rossiter — I mean Rollins!

I must see you — now! For pity's sake, let me in!"

"How dare you—" she began shrilly; but he was not to be denied.

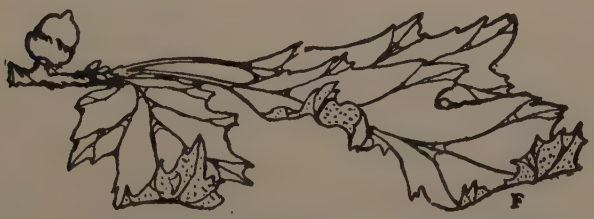
"If you don't open this door I'll kick it in!" he shouted. "I must see you!"

After a moment the door flew open and he stood facing her. She was like a queen. Her figure was as straight as an arrow, her eyes blazing. But there had been tears in them a moment before.

"Another insult!" she exclaimed, and the scorn in her voice was withering. He paused abashed, for the first time realizing that he had hurt her beyond reparation. His voice faltered and the tears flew to his eyes.

"I don't know what to say to you. It has been a mistake—a frightful mistake —and I don't know whether you 'll let me explain. When I got downstairs I found this telegram and—for heaven's sake, let me tell you the wretched story. Don't turn away from me! You shall listen to me if I have to hold you!" His manner changed suddenly to the violent, imperious forcefulness of a man driven to the last resort.

"Must I call for help?" she cried, thoroughly alarmed, once more the weak woman, face to face, as she thought, with an insane man.

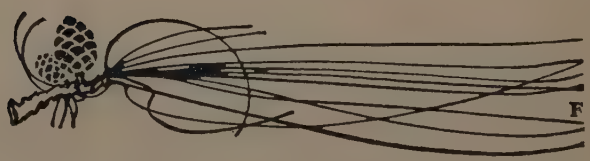


"I love you better than my own life, and I 've hurt you terribly. I 'm not

crazy, Helen! But I 've been a fool, and I 'll go crazy if you don't give me a chance to explain."

Whether she gave the chance or no he took it, and from his eager, pleading lips raced the whole story of his connection with the Wharton affair from first to last.

He humbled himself, accused himself, ridiculed himself, and wound up by throwing himself upon her mercy, uttering



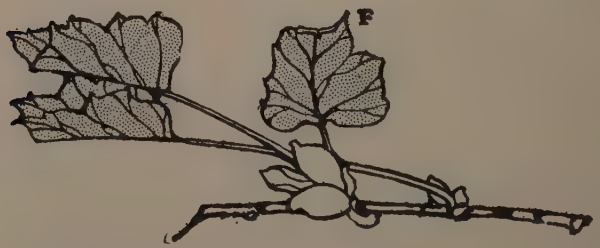
protestations of the love which had really been his undoing.

She heard him through without a word. The light in her eyes changed; the fear left them and the scorn fled. Instead there grew, by stages, wonder, incredulity, wavering doubt and — joy. She understood him and she loved him! The awful horror of that meeting in the hallway was swept away like unto the transformation scene in the fairy spectacle.

When he fell upon his knee and sought to clasp her fingers in his cold hand she smiled, and, stooping over, placed both hands on his cheeks and kissed him.

What followed her kiss of forgiveness may be more easily imagined than told.

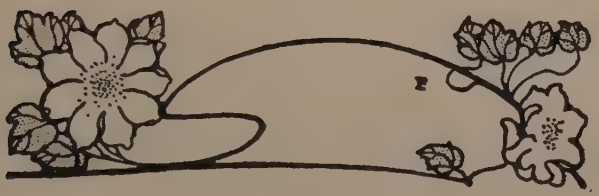
"You see it was perfectly natural for me to mistake you for Mrs. Wharton," he said after awhile. "You had the gray jacket, the sailor hat, the purple parasol, and you are beautiful. And, besides all that, you were found red-handed in that ridiculous town of Fossingford. Why should n't I have suspected you with such a preponderance of evidence against you? Anybody who would get off of a night train in Fossingford certainly ought to be ashamed of something."



"But Fossingford is on the map, is n't it? One has a perfect right to get off where she likes, has n't she, provided it is on the map?"

"'Perhaps it is because I have a fancy for the ridiculous'"

"Not at all! That 's what maps are for: to let you see where you don't get off."



"But I was obliged to get off there. My ticket said 'Fossingford,' and, besides, I was to be met at the station in a most legitimate manner. You had no right to jump at conclusions."

"Well, if you had not descended to earth at Fossingford I wouldn't be in heaven at Eagle Nest. Come to think of it, I believe you did quite the proper thing in getting off at Fossingford — no matter what the hour."

"You must remember always that I have not taken you to task for a most

flagrant piece of — shall I say indiscretion?"

"Good Heavens!"

"You stopped off at Fossingford for the sole purpose of seeing another woman."

"That 's all very fine, dear, but you 'll admit that Dudley was an excellent substitute for Havens. Can't you see how easy it was to be mistaken?"

"I won't fall into easy submission. Still, I believe I could recommend you as a detective. They usually do the most unheard of things — just as you have. Poor Jim Dudley an actor! Mistaken for such a man as you say Havens is! It is even more ridiculous than that I should be mistaken for Mrs. Wharton."

"Say, I 'd like to know something about Dudley. It was his confounded devotion to you that helped matters along in my mind. What is he to you?"

"He came here to-night to repeat a question that had been answered unalterably once before. Jim Dudley? Have you never heard of James Dudley, the man who owns all of those big mines in South America, the man who ——"

"Who owns the yachts and automobiles and—and the railroad trains? Is he the one? The man with the millions? Good Lord! And you could have had him instead of me? Helen, I — I don't understand it. Why did n't you take him?"

She hesitated a moment before answering brightly:

"Perhaps it is because I have a fancy for the ridiculous."

THE END